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Atari Online News, Etc.
A-ONE Online Magazine
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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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As I mentioned last week, we got blasted by an incredible storm last Friday. We're still talking about each other's saga about getting home that day. For some, it took 4-5 hours to get home. For many, they waited the storm out, the roads to get plowed, and then it still took them a couple of hours to make short trips. Amazing. We were still cleaning out through the weekend - over a foot of snow fell in my area after a predicted 3-6 inches. The neighborhood kids loved it, as did my dogs!

Otherwise, this past week has been a journey into the arctic! The mercury has been hovering between zero and ten degrees every morning this week; and the temperatures haven't got above freezing all week. I'm not ready for this yet!

Also, as I mentioned last week, our accreditation survey ended, and the initial results turned out extremely positive. We received numerous e-mails from our administration with glowing comments. So, the 6-8 weeks of preparation (read: total chaos!) apparently paid off. Thankfully, that is all over. Now we can all play catch-up and get back to our "normal" work that has been piling up!

So, I hope that everyone is ready for the holidays. Personally, I still have plenty of shopping left to do, although we managed to get a lot done last weekend (in-between shoveling). My wife and I are on vacation this upcoming week, so I'm sure at least a day or two will be spent hitting the stores. Definitely looking forward to some needed time off.

Until next time...

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Atari ST 20 Years Megademo Released

Anders Eriksson has announced:

Twenty years after the release of the Atari ST, the atari demo scene proudly announces the release of the ’20 years’ megademo. Combined with the demo release, the pictures, songs and demo screens are competing for fine prizes. Please give your support by voting.

The demo includes twenty screens, filling up two 820k floppy disks. We also support hard disk users for a more comfortable way of watching the demo. For Falcon and TT users there are less to chose from, we recommend that you use an ST or STe instead for the full deal. Before you start the demo, please read the included info file, especially the BUGS section.

Thanks to everyone who has participated - sixty people in total! See you in the 30th anniversary mega demo!

Hard disk version:

http://files.dhs.nu/compo/2005/hd_20yrs.zip

Floppy disk version:

http://files.dhs.nu/compo/2005/fl_20yrs.zip

Vote sheet:

http://files.dhs.nu/compo/2005/vote2005.txt

Beta Testers Wanted!

We’re ready to start beta testing the next version of our CD writing package, which will support DVD recorders as well. Apart from DVD support, the main new features are:

- "burnproof" recording
- support for session-at-once audio CD recording
- backup of non-TOS partitions

Beta tester requirements:

- DVD recorder (if possible)
- a copy of ExtenDOS v4
- experience with CD Writer Suite v3
- good command of English or French
- sufficient time :-) (expect to take 10-20 hours)

Previous beta testing experience would be a help.

If you would like to help out, please email us at:
b...@anodynesoftware.com
and tell us what hardware & software you have.

Thanks,
Roger & Claude
Anodyne Software

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING

compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho, friends and neighbors. There won't be any messages from the UseNet this week, because there were a grand total of 22 messages posted in comp.sys.atari.st this week. That's just not enough to put together a decent column. So I'm going to talk a little bit about the holidays. I hope you don't mind.

We're now a meager 10 days from Christmas, and 1 day away from my vacation. I always take the week before Christmas off so that I can get my holiday shopping done. It's really not too bad, even in the last few days, if you can go during the day and not at night after a long day at work, stuck in endless limbo in a store along with everyone else who's unhappy being there after a long day at work.

One thing that's annoying me right now is this "Merry Christmas/Happy Holidays" controversy. On the one hand, we have people who want us to say "Happy Holidays" because not everyone observes Christmas. Okay, that sounds reasonable, doesn't it?

On the other hand, there are those who say, "I celebrate Christmas. Why should I have to hide that?" Again, that doesn't sound unreasonable.

So what do we do when we're confronted with two reasonable possibilities backed by some unreasonable, or at least unmoving, people?

With all that's going on in the world, don't we have anything more serious or more important to worry about than whether we say "Merry Christmas" or "Happy Holidays"???

My preference has usually been "Happy Holidays", but I've never gotten all fussy when someone says "Merry Christmas" to me. Of course, I celebrate Christmas, so that explains why I'm not offended by the mention of the particular celebration.

So here's what I propose:
If you're a Christian, say "Merry Christmas". If you're a Jew, say "Happy Hannukah". If you're a follower of Islam, say "Good Ramadan". If you're Pagan, say "Happy Solstice". If you're Agnostic, say whatever the heck you want to say, I guess. If you want, you can even reply, "Bah, humbug".

Of course, you'll have to pay attention to the time of year, since none of the holidays always match up with the others.

Now comes the important part...

If someone passes you and gives you one of the above-mentioned greetings, smile and either reply in kind or with one that suits your beliefs. Don't fuss and say, "I don't believe in <fill in the blank>. They didn't ask you what you believed in, they offered you a greeting. Simply accept the greeting for what it was... a wish for well-being and/or happiness during a special time.

Believe it or not, there are a plethora of possibilities when someone wishes you happiness for a holiday that you don't celebrate. You can reply in kind ("And a Merry Christmas to you too, Madam."), you can reply by substituting a holiday that you DO celebrate ("Merry Christmas, Sir". "Happy Hannukah to you, Madam"), or you can reply with the generic ("Happy Holidays to you too, Ma'am"). Alternatively, you could say, "And a Happy New Year". Personally, my favorite reply this season is, "And to you, Sir/Madam".

I'm starting to feel like I'm in the minority, but I don't feel the need to broadcast my beliefs or their strength to everyone I come across. I prefer to let others form their opinion of me on the basis of my ACTIONS, not my pronouncements or protestations.

If you agree with this, please mention it to everyone you know. If you don't agree with it, well... Happy Holidays. <grin>

Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Video Games Sales Slump!
""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""" Gauntlet: Seven Sorrows!
Grandia III!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""

Video-Game Sales Slump Ahead of Holidays

The video-game industry saw software sales decline from 2004 levels for a third straight month in November as the launch of Microsoft Corp.'s Xbox 360 console helped erode demand for existing titles.

U.S. video-game sales plunged 18 percent from last year to about $700 million in November, market research firm NPD Group said on Wednesday.

The overall results were buoyed somewhat by hardware sales, which gained 10 percent to about $456 million over November 2004. Including accessories, total industry sales slid 9 percent to reach $1.3 billion last month.

Analysts say the November figures are difficult to compare with the

year-ago period, when blockbuster hits "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas" and "Halo 2" drove a sharp rise in sales.

Still, last month's sales were almost twice those in October as the industry ramped up for the critical holiday spending season.

Much of the decline in software sales can be attributed to consumers holding out for the next wave of consoles, such as the late November debut of Xbox 360, said Wedbush Morgan analyst Michael Pachter. Gamers have also been waiting for the spring release of Sony Corp.'s PlayStation 3.

But while retailers sold about $70 million of software for Xbox 360 and $60 million for new handheld systems, that was not enough to counter the $240 million drop in sales of current games, Pachter noted.

"We think that consumers have been lulled into believing that the next-generation consoles are just around the corner ..." he wrote in a research note. "Should that be the case, we think that weakness in sales may persist in December, and the year could end up in negative territory."

LucasArts' "Star Wars: Battlefront II" led November's top-10 titles, selling 467,000 copies of the game for the Xbox and 447,000 units for PlayStation 2.

Frenzied demand for new systems is expected to boost sales in the coming months, but a shortage of Xbox 360s has some analysts worried about results for the holiday season. And game publisher Activision Inc. added to the gloom when it warned of a quarterly profit shortfall late Wednesday.

Although Activision's November sales surged 54 percent - helped mostly by its "Call of Duty 2" for Xbox 360, the third-best seller last month - the company said its overall game portfolio is lagging expectations. Both its third- and fourth-quarter sales are forecast to miss Wall Street estimates, Activision said.

Gauntlet: Seven Sorrows Ships For Xbox and Playstation 2

Midway Games Inc., a leading interactive entertainment publisher and developer, announced that it has shipped the latest installment in the legendary franchise, Gauntlet: Seven Sorrows for the PlayStation 2 computer entertainment system and the Xbox video game system from Microsoft.

"The Gauntlet franchise has been making gamers' thumbs blister and ache for years with its 4 player co-op and intense hack-n-slash combat, and Seven Sorrows absolutely takes the addictive core gameplay to the next level," said Steve Allison, chief marketing officer, Midway. "While staying true to the franchise's roots, Gauntlet: Seven Sorrows also features a deeper gameplay mechanic that allows player progression, all-new combos and attacks, and for the first time ever, takes it all online."

The legendary arcade classic, Gauntlet, returns bringing back the all-time fan favorites; addictive cooperative game play and the intuitive hack-and-slash style, and for the first time ever, takes it all online. Breathing new life into four classic heroes, the Elf, Warrior, Wizard and Valkyrie, Gauntlet: Seven Sorrows is packed with fantasy fighting action, with each of the main characters featuring multiple weapons skills that are

unique to their class.

Square Enix Announces Stateside Release for Grandia III For Playstation 2

Square Enix, Inc. announced that Grandia III will be released stateside in February. Exclusively for the PlayStation 2 computer entertainment system, Grandia III draws gamers into a wondrous world with an innovative battle system and uplifting story about the freedom in controlling one’s own destiny.

"In all of our games, we want the player to be left with an overwhelmingly positive feeling that they can achieve anything they desire in life. In Grandia III while there is strong conflict in everyone’s lives, those who are strong will overcome it," said Hidenobu Takahashi, Director for Grandia III.

"Another great element in Grandia III is the battle system. We’re really proud of what we were able to achieve utilizing the command wheel; the battle system can be very complex but is very easy to learn," said Katsunori Saito, Game Arts Producer for Grandia III. "The combination of the story, fast-paced battle system and beautiful environment will prove to be an extremely enjoyable adventure."

Yuki has idolized the legendary pilot Schmidt since he was a young boy and has been trying to build his own ever since. Loving the freedom of flight, he dreams of one day leaving his small island and reaching the mainland.

In the woods not far away, Alfina rides alone on a horse-drawn carriage. She is a Communicator, one of the few who can speak with the Guardians, gods that protect the world. She is hurrying to a temple to take the place of her brother, Emelious. Resentment of his obligated duty as a Communicator has turned Emelious into a cruel and violent being filled with hate.

Fate will bring together Yuki and Alfina just as the world is about to fall apart.

FEATURES

* Romp through vibrant and colorful fantasy locales and natural environments
* Stunning cinematic sequences are animated by hand without the use of motion capture
* Scan surroundings to look for search points or treasure chests
* Ply the skies by plane to journey from one place to another
* Use your sword in the "random encounter free" field to destroy objects or stun enemies before attacking
* Seamless transition from field screen to battles with over-the-top animations
* Semi real-time battle system allows for fast paced action and strategizing with a Command Wheel breaks the RPG mold of typical command text windows
* Perform and link up Aerial Combo attacks for massive damage
* Multiple auto-battle settings for each character dictate fighting strategy, in addition, utilize the Strategy Advice System for tips during critical moments in battle

* Control conversation flow during special event scenes.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

New Antivirus Tool is Coming

Security vendor eEye Digital Security plans to add antivirus capabilities to its Blink intrusion prevention product, and will release a beta version of the software early next year, according to a company executive.

"We are developing our own generic antivirus now," said eEye co-founder and Chief Hacking Officer Marc Maiffret, in an interview.

A beta version of the software will be made available to Blink users in early in 2006, he said. "It'll be an update basically, so any customers who have [Blink] will get it for free."

Currently, the Blink firewall can be used for security policy enforcement and to protect clients from network-based attacks, antispyware, and phishing attacks, according to eEye.

Rather than checking software that wants to run on the system against a database of known malware, an approach called "signature-based" prevention, Blink's antivirus software will examine the program's behavior to determine whether or not it is malicious. This behavior-based approach is already used by a number of products, including Sana Security's Primary Response and McAfee's Entercept.

The antivirus software market is crowded with products right now, but eEye appears to be taking the right approach, said Andrew Janquith, a senior analyst with Yankee Group Research.

"It's a bit late for them to come to the party, but they may benefit from recognizing that the signature-based approach to virus detection isn't working anymore."

Signature-based techniques are still the most widely used form of antivirus detection, but they are starting to break down because of the massive amount of malicious software in circulation, Janquith said. "There are well over 100,000 signatures that antivirus vendors are tracking. By way of comparison, most PCs have about 50,000 files on them right now."

Behavior-based antivirus software has a chance of preventing unknown attacks from succeeding, but it is generally not as effective as the signature-based alternatives against known attacks, he said.

The antivirus market is dominated by Symantec, McAfee, and Trend Micro. In 2004, they accounted for 83 percent of the $2.5 billion worldwide antivirus market, according to research firm Gartner.

Blink is not the only product that eEye has been improving. Earlier this week, the company announced a new version of its REM management console. REM 3.0 features improved management and reporting capabilities, the company said.

Google, Microsoft, and Sun Fund Internet Research Lab

Technology titans Google, Microsoft, and Sun Microsystems will provide $7.5 million, collectively, to fund research at a University of California, Berkeley, laboratory that will use the money to focus on next-generation Internet technology.

The Reliable, Adaptive, and Distributed (RAD) systems lab is designed to create technology for use by inventors and entrepreneurs who will be developing broad-based services like the kind offered by eBay or Amazon, said David Patterson, a UC Berkeley professor and founding director of the RAD lab.

Researchers will focus on alternative strategies to traditional software-engineering approaches. Software development for big projects usually is done by large teams in orderly stages, starting from system concept to development, assessment, deployment, and operation.

The lab’s goal is to perform such tasks and invent new tools for smaller groups or entrepreneurs, Patterson said. "We can help do this by applying statistical machine learning to the development of computer systems," he said.

Google, Microsoft, and Sun Microsystems, founding members of the RAD lab, each are donating $500,000 per year. With smaller contributions expected from other I.T. companies, the research laboratory will receive about 80 percent of its support from industry sources.

Any software and applications emerging from the lab will be made available to the public, with source code distributed using the Berkeley Software Distribution (BSD) license.

"We are creating an open-source toolkit for Internet research," said Patterson, noting that the university has an established track record for developing technologies that have resulted in the founding of multimillion-dollar businesses.

The investors, all of which have a vested interest in Internet services, will benefit by getting a glimpse of new ideas at the early stages of development and the obstacles that must be overcome to grow the industry as a whole, Patterson said.

Grants from the National Science Foundation and the university’s Microelectronics Innovation and Computer Research Opportunities (MICRO) program hopefully will comprise the remaining 20 percent of funding for the center.

"Government funding for this type of research has fallen off, which means that companies have to step up in helping produce the next generation of technology leaders in information technology," said Patterson. "There are a lot of bright young people that deserve support, but can’t find it

elsewhere."

The RAD lab will start with six UC Berkeley faculty members and 10 graduate students. The number of graduate students participating is expected to grow to 30 over the years. Representatives from the companies will act as consultants and provide advice for the center's participants, but they will not work at the RAD lab.

Opera Dismisses Google Takeover Talk

Opera Software has not been approached by Google about a possible acquisition, an Opera spokesperson said Friday, dismissing rumors that Google is eyeing a takeover of the Norwegian browser company.

"These are just rumors. We have not been approached," said Tor Odland, communications director for the Norwegian company Opera.

The rumors appear to have stemmed from a blog posting Tuesday by Pierre Chappaz, a former head of Yahoo's European operations. "According to a source who is usually well informed, Google is close to acquiring the Opera browser," he wrote in his blog in French.

Officials at Google were not immediately available. A spokesperson with the company's public relations agency in Europe had no comment to make.

One analyst said buying Opera would make sense for Google, particularly given its expansion beyond search and its apparent ambition to offer productivity applications over the Web as a service.

Google announced a partnership with Sun Microsystems in October, part of which included finding ways to expand the distribution of OpenOffice.org, the open-source productivity suite on which Sun StarOffice is built. The companies offered few details, but some analysts saw it as a move towards Google offering hosted applications.

"Having a browser would make it easier to do the software-on-demand type of proposition they are getting into with Sun and OpenOffice.org," said Mike Davis, a senior research analyst with The Butler Group, in the U.K. "From a pure design point of view, you want to have control over not just the back-end systems but the whole delivery process to the end user."

Google could also optimize its own browser for even faster Web searches, he said. "It would be able to produce something very fast and slick and accessible."

Google will inevitably have its own browser eventually, according to Davis. The question is only whether it will acquire one or develop it in-house, he said.

The company has already been rumored to be developing its own browser, he noted. "Buying an established one that already has a presence and a level of respect would be a sensible thing to do if it wants to continue its expansion outside search," Davis said.

Another analyst called the discussion a good rumor that's sure to "keep the perceived Google-Microsoft rivalry ratcheted up another notch."

"Whilst it may be difficult for Google to make any direct income from acquiring a browser, there might be the advantage that the company could package a browser pre-configured with Google goodies that it could then attempt to get PC suppliers to preload as part of the machines' base install," said Tony Lock, chief analyst with Bloor Research of the U.K.

"This would give customers an alternative to Internet Explorer, but one with Google 'preferences' rather than Microsoft's."

In his blog posting, Chappaz said such a move by Google would allow it to respond to Microsoft if the company were to integrate its MSN search engine more tightly with its Internet Explorer browser.

For its upcoming IE 7 product, Microsoft could take inspiration from Firefox and feature its search engine more prominently, Chappaz wrote. Google appears prominently as the default search engine in Firefox.

In a November 18 blog posting, Chappaz also predicted that Yahoo would buy Del.icio.us. Yahoo announced that it had acquired the social bookmarking company on December 9.

It May Be time for a Commodore Comeback

No, Lionel Richie isn't signing up with his old band. We're talking about Commodore, the venerable computer brand.

A Dutch consumer media company is hoping it can tap the power of the VIC 20, the PET and the Commodore 64 to launch a new wave of products, including a home media center device and a portable GPS (Global Positioning System) unit and media player.

Yeahronimo Media Ventures, which has offices in Los Angeles and Baarn, the Netherlands, acquired the rights to the Commodore name late last year in a deal worth just over $32.7 million. Earlier this year, it took on Commodore as its own corporate moniker. The rebranded company already has some products available in Europe and on its Web site, but hopes to enter the U.S. market at the Computer Electronics Show in Las Vegas in January.

In an interview, Commodore CEO Ben van Wijhe said the company bought the Commodore name with the idea of tapping its reputation for games and multimedia.

"It is not only the brand name but also the heritage of Commodore that interested us," he said.

The company has said it plans to launch three products at the show. The Commodore MediaBox is an all-in-one home entertainment box with an Internet connection, digital TV tuner and hard drive for playing music downloads, games or on-demand video. The Commodore Navigator is a Windows CE-based portable device with a 20GB hard drive for music and video storage as well as built-in GPS and a 3.6-inch touch screen.

Commodore is far from the first company to try to revive a once-popular tech brand. The Amiga, Commodore's onetime PC brand, has had its own decades-long history as fans tried to preserve both the computer's operating system and brand despite the lack of strong corporate backing.

Gateway had hopes of reinvigorating the Amiga PC when it bought the name and technology in 1997, but eventually scrapped its plans and sold the brand in 1999. Efforts to keep the computer's OS alive, however, have continued into the current decade.

Another '80s game name, Atari, bounced among several owners before making a comeback earlier this decade. Gamemaker Infogrames acquired Atari's name and game titles in 2001 and began using Atari as its own corporate name in May 2003. Meanwhile, Atari's classic games have also found new life in low-end TV consoles and cell phones.

Napster is perhaps one of the best-known recent transformations, with an authorized music subscription service taking on the brand built as the first of many rebel peer-to-peer file-sharing systems.

Van Wijhe said he has heard from a lot of Commodore and Amiga fans in the 12 months since his company announced plans to acquire the well-known name.

"People were looking at us very close to see what we were going to do with it," he said. "We got thousands of e-mails of people that wanted to work for us and with us."

Commodore itself, though, is quite small, currently employing about 50 people with annual sales of around 40 million euros ($48 million).

"We're growing fast, very fast," Van Wijhe said.

Sober Worm Attack Set for January 6

Computer users and system administrators, take note. According to iDefense, a division of VeriSign, on January 6, 2006, the world will see the release of a new version of the Sober worm. Security analysts hope that, at least in this instance, being forewarned can lead to being forearmed, and that computer users will take the time before the attack to update their security software.

The discovery was made as researchers at iDefense sought to unravel the most recent version of the Sober worm's encrypted code through reverse engineering. The latest variant was released in mid-November, infecting thousands of computers. A week later, the worm reinfected computers with another variant that sent faux e-mails supposedly from the FBI, the UK's National High Tech Crime Unit, and the CIA. Intelligence experts believe that this version infected millions of computers in a prelude to the scheduled attack in January.

While Ken Durham, director of iDefense's Rapid Response Team, acknowledged that most antivirus firms worth their salt who have studied the Sober worm are also aware of the date, he said iDefense decided to go public hoping that awareness would breed caution that will help mitigate the spread of the worm.

"This is not like we have the corner on the market in knowing about dates and how Sober works," Durham said. "The reason you do an announcement is that this is a user-interaction worm. If people realize that there is going to be a large-scale e-mail worm spread on or around those dates and they know what to be prepared for, you can help mitigate that worm."

The Sober worm first appeared in October 2003, during what was later dubbed the "year of the worm" because of major worm attacks such as Blaster, SoBig.F, Nachi, and others. According to Durham, Sober didn't show up on the radar screen as notable or significant at that time, but over the past two years it became clear to security experts what the motive was behind the Sober worms and that the author was in it for the long term and that this was going to be a persistent attack.

"We often see codes rise and fall," said Durham. "Some malicious authors are working on things as teenagers, but then they grow up and get out of the business. In other cases, we find they do more sustained efforts over a period of time. In the case of the Sober worms, we found that it was strongly correlated to Neo Nazi right-wing agendas."

Durham said this so-called "hactivism" came to light over a period time because the worm's authors would promote their code and spread it on historical dates of significance. For instance, November 22, the date of the most recent Sober release, was also the day Germany's first female chancellor was inaugurated. January 6 marks the 87th anniversary of the founding of the Nazi Party in Germany.

"At one point [the authors] actually used their infected computers to spam out e-mails that would direct people to right-wing based Web sites," Durham said. "They were very clearly using this to promote that kind of a religious and political agenda as compared to a traditional person who is looking more for their own notoriety and 15 minutes of fame or someone who may be working with more of a criminal intent for financial gain."

Security analysts say that, whether for profit or to support a political agenda, the only way to combat these Internet plagues is for computer owners and system administrators to be aware of potential threats and maintain systems with up-to-date antivirus protection.

A recent report by America Online and the National Cyber Security Alliance found that up to 81 percent of respondents had no security controls. Of that number, 56 percent did not have any antivirus software or had software that had not been updated in the past week, and 44 percent had an improperly configured firewall. As for spyware, 38 percent said they had no antispyware protection at all.

What began as a relatively unsophisticated worm, Durham said, has now become a leading threat with modifications by the author. One e-mail gateway has logged millions of interceptions of Sober on a daily basis, racking up 94 million during the first big outbreak in November, Durham revealed.

"The latest version of Sober was very successful in spamming itself to the world," Durham said. "It has been set up so it has the technical capability to send out large volumes of e-mail from any single infected machine."

According to statistics from Sophos, the Sober worm accounted for 77.3 percent of all reports filed so far in December. That number represents roughly one Sober infected e-mail for every 45 e-mails the average user receives. Sober was the worm most reported to Sophos in November, despite its late release during the last full week of the month.

"These figures tell us that Sober-Z has managed to infect a lot of people so far," said Carol Theriault, senior security analyst at Sophos. "Being able to predict an incident means that [security firms] can tell people about it so that they can take appropriate action."

Yankee Group analyst Andrew Jaquith agreed that these kinds of announcements are helpful because they give people an idea of what future threats will look like, and it allows consumers and corporate customers an opportunity to prepare themselves for a coming attack. However, Jaquith is concerned that alerts of this magnitude might be lost amid the constant onslaught of virus alerts that users receive.

"It’s not a question of someone crying wolf," said Theriault. "It’s just that there are so many wolves, there is a lot of crying going on. It’s just one more thing in a never-ending stream of security problems for Windows."

StealthText, Should You Choose to Accept It

A UK company has brought to life the self-destructing messages of ’Mission Impossible.’

Staellium UK Ltd. has introduced StealthText, a service available via SMS (Short Message Service) and WAP (Wireless Application Protocol) phones, which enables senders to punch in a self-destruct code when they send text messages. The recipient receives a text message showing the sender’s name and providing a link to the message.

Once opened, the message disappears after about 40 seconds.

Carole Barnum, CEO and cofounder of the company, told Ziff Davis Internet News that the idea was inspired by living through the Sep 11 terrorist attacks on New York.

"Certainly, as the world is becoming more dangerous, I think we need to cherish what we have, which is the communication that we have with people we love, [whom] we want to protect," she said, adding, "information is being misused."

Staellium’s founders originally conceived of the service as catering to the needs of business executives dealing with sensitive information, as well as those of celebrities who are up to no good.

In keeping with its original intent, the company has received inquiries from a diverse range of financial services firms and celebrity agents. It has also attracted interest from defense and intelligence agencies, Barnum said, including, reportedly, the United Kingdom’s Ministry of Defense.

"The technology behind StealthText is derived from military technology, so the comparisons with ’Mission Impossible’ are justified," Barnum is quoted as saying in a news release.

Self-destructing text messages are just a start, however-the company plans to tackle self-destruction in other venues as well, starting in the spring.

"The ability to send a self-destruct message has massive benefits for people from all walks of life, from everyday mobile users, through to celebrities and business people, but this is just the start," Barnum said in the release. "In spring 2006 we will be launching new services such as self-destruct e-mail, voice and picture messages, so ultimately no one will ever have to worry about their messages or pictures ending up in the wrong hands ever again."

Both Staellium and the European Union’s lawmakers are aware that the service can be used for illicit purposes. To comply with data retention laws, the service retains a paper trail and log that remains on a protected, secure server for between six months and two years before being deleted.

Yahoo expands its mobile search with text messaging. Read more here.

Staellium is also sensitive to the fact that the technology can be misused by children. The law now dictates that the legal age to use wireless access services is 16, but Staellium puts the age limit higher, with a minimum age of 18 being required to use its service.

The service is available around the world to users of UK SIM [Subscriber Identity Module] cards only. It will be available across Europe, the United States and Asia early next year.

To sign up for the service, users simply text STEALTH to 80880 to receive a link that allows them to download a StealthText applet via a WAP connection. To unsubscribe from the service, the user texts STOP to the same number.

Recipients don’t require downloaded applets to receive StealthTexts. Recipients can reply with StealthTexts, creating a private channel of two-way communication. If they choose not to reply with StealthText, recipients can still receive text notifications of incoming StealthTexts.

Critics point out that the self-destructing messages can easily be subverted by taking screenshots before the message disappears.

Barnum ceded the point, but she said businesspeople still like the service for its ease of use and low cost.

"A lot of people are trying to see how they can contravene the way the service has been set up," Barnum told Ziff Davis Internet News. "But when you go on the Web and the page has expired, there aren’t a lot of solutions for people to resurrect a page. You can sit back and have a camera and take a snapshot and do these kinds of things, but when people are [sending sensitive business information], they like the ease of the service and the fact that it’s inexpensive. They like that it works and that it’s reliable, and that we can deploy it around the world.

"We’re not in the business of looking for hackers and [seeing] what they’ll try to do," she said. "This service has been tested, it’s been tried and it’s reliable."

The StealthText service fee is .50p per text, and the service is sold by bundles of 10 for 5. Staellium is also offering two free self-destructing messages, sold in bundles of 12 texts for the price of 10.

Software Pirate Pleads Guilty

A California man who operated a Web site selling millions of dollars of pirated software has pleaded guilty to two counts of criminal copyright infringement, the Department of Justice says.

Nathan Peterson, 26, of Antelope Acres, California, pleaded guilty Tuesday in U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia in Alexandria. Peterson was owner of iBackups.net, "the largest for-profit software piracy site ever shut down by law enforcement," U.S. Attorney Paul McNulty of the Eastern District of Virginia said in a statement.

Peterson faces a maximum sentence of ten years in prison and a $500,000 fine. Sentencing is scheduled for April 14. Including restitution of $5.4 million, the penalties may be the highest ever imposed on a software pirate, said the Software & Information Industry Association (SIIA). The trade group in 2003 alerted the FBI, which has been cracking down on piracy, of possible copyright violations at iBackups.

Peterson’s Web site was responsible for close to $20 million taken away from software vendors, the DOJ said. Peterson told customers that software sold on iBackups was legal "backup software" to protect against computer crashes, SIIA said.

The iBackups site, distributing products via downloads or mail, sold software "substantially below" suggested retail prices from companies such as Adobe Systems, Macromedia, Microsoft, and Symantec, the DOJ said.

Law enforcement authorities shut down iBackups in February, and the site now tells visitors it was shuttered by the FBI and DOJ. The site started operating in 2003 and advertised its products over the Internet, SIIA said.

Peterson used iBackups to fund an "extravagant lifestyle," including purchases of multiple homes, cars, and a boat, the DOJ said. The government seized numerous assets from Peterson, including a restored 1949 Mercury Coupe vehicle purchased for $44,000, a 2005 Dodge Ram, a 2003 Chevrolet Corvette, a 2004 Toyota Camry, a 2005 Toyota Corolla, and a 2006 Mercedes-Benz S-Class bought for $125,000.

Yahoo Builds Better Widgets

Yahoo has upgraded its platform of tiny desktop applications, called widgets, to include better integration with the portal’s mapping services and search offerings. Yahoo has a small army of developers working on new widgets in an effort to draw more users to the site.

In releasing Widget Engine 3.0, Yahoo made three significant upgrades, said Arlo Rose, director of the company’s widget technology. The first is "frames" for streaming content feeds, such as RSS, to the scaled-down applications.

Also, widgets now support XML data for access to server data. Users can log in to Yahoo’s system through the widgets and access a wide variety of information, such as address book and calendar information, without having to use a browser window.

Widgets are lightweight applications that reside on the desktop and perform tasks that range from checking for Wi-Fi availability to accessing e-mail. The technology initially was known as Konfabulator and developed by Pixoria, a company purchased by Yahoo earlier this year.

Yahoo has distributed over 1.5 million copies of the renamed Yahoo widgets platform, with some 10 million downloads of the tools by users thus far.

The latest iteration is available for Windows and Mac users.

"This is a great way for people to start using Yahoo services without a Web connection," Rose said. "We now have a community of developers working on new widgets, combining APIs to create a wide selection of applications." Widget Engine 3.0 is the first version to include contributions from the Yahoo Developer Network, he said.

Among the new widgets unveiled this week are a mapping application integrated with Yahoo Maps; an update of the photo-display widget that now displays photos from Yahoo Photos, Flickr, or images stored on the computer; and a desktop-search application that eliminates the need for you to open a browser window.

In theory, any Yahoo property - movie trailers, television listings, and sports scores - could potentially be accessed by a widget. The goal is to encourage user experimentation and provide new ways to view the company's Web site information. While access to the widgets is free, Yahoo expects the software will generate more interest in its services and help the company expand its advertising base.

More than 2,000 widgets created by third-party developers are available for download from Yahoo. "Developers can now tap in to our open infrastructure to create the coolest little mini applications around," said Rose.

Online Retailers Step Up Discount Offers

Online retailers stepped up discounting ahead of the deadline this week for most free shipping of Christmas gifts with guarantee of standard delivery. But they're not panicking - overall, the holiday 2005 shopping season is shaping up well.

Meanwhile, traditional storeowners are waiting for the final shopping week before Christmas to see how their sales turn out.

"This week, consumers can expect to be hearing from retailers reminding them of all the strong promotions that they are offering," said Scott Silverman, executive director of Shop.org, a division of the National Retail Federation in Washington. Online retailers, though, are "going to be pleasantly surprised. The level of optimism is quite high."

Online retailers - like their brick-and-mortar counterparts - jump-started the season with more generous bargains and free shipping than a year ago because of a spike in gasoline prices. But their anxiety has receded along with the price of fuel in recent weeks.

Still, online merchants have increased incentives in the final stretch to seal what they expect will be a strong season. This week, Bluefly.com, which sells discounted designer clothing, is offering an extra 20 percent off each day on different apparel, from sweaters to outerwear. Harryanddavid.com, the gourmet food retailer, is offering a deal where shoppers can buy one item and get the second at half price.

For the 39-day period ended Dec. 9, non-travel spending online surged 23 percent to $12.75 billion from a year ago, according to comScore Networks Inc. That's a bit below the Internet research company's forecast for a 24 percent gain for the season, but comScore Chairman Gian Fulgoni said that

this week - the busiest for online retailers - should make up for any shortfall.

While the busiest day for online retailers last year was Dec. 14, Fulgoni expects it may be pushed to Thursday or Friday because of the increasing reliability of online retailers and shoppers' confidence in them.

According to the most recent data from Nielsen/NetRatings Inc., an Internet research firm, online shopping trips to more than 100 e-commerce sites shot up 33 percent for the week ended Dec. 4 from a year ago.

Yahoo! Shopping said Tuesday that traffic has risen from 45 percent to 55 percent since the day after Thanksgiving, beating expectations for growth of 25 percent to 30 percent.

Shipping giants Memphis-based FedEx Corp. and Atlanta-based UPS Inc. have benefited from the popularity of online shopping, though neither knows for sure how many of those packages are headed to online shoppers.

On what is usually its busiest day of the year, FedEx delivered 8.5 million packages Monday, a 5 percent increase over the same day last year.

Norm Black, spokesman at UPS, said the company is still projecting that it will carry more than 20 million packages on its peak day of Dec. 20. Last year, it projected it would carry about 20 million packages on its peak day, he said.

Meanwhile, on land, stores face more modest gains. According to Michael P. Niemira, chief economist at the International Council of Shopping Centers, sales in November and December for the 75 retailers he tracks will be up anywhere from 3 percent to 3.5 percent on the year. The tally is based on same-store sales, or sales at stores opened at least a year.

While brick and mortar stores depend on the final days before Christmas for sales, online retailers hope to extend their season as well, with many sweetening their shipping offers next week.

Bluefly.com will be offering a free two-day delivery on items ordered from Thursday through next Wednesday.

"We did it last year, but it was a smaller period," said Melissa Payner, CEO of Bluefly.com.

Enigma of Mona Lisa Smile Cracked

The enigma of Leonardo da Vinci's famous Mona Lisa painting has been cracked with the help of emotion-recognition software from scientists at the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

The painting, which is now in the Louvre Museum in Paris, France, was painted at some point between 1503 and 1506, according to art historians.

After centuries of speculation about what the lady in the picture was thinking about, the software concluded that Mona Lisa was actually happy and only a little disgusted as she sat for Leonardo to paint her portrait.

According to findings published in the New Scientist, a British journal, the exact breakdown of Mona Lisa's emotions, as captured by Leonardo da Vinci, were 83 percent happy, 9 percent disgusted, 6 percent fearful, and 2 percent angry.

Dr. Nicu Sebe, a professor at the Faculty of Science of the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands, used emotion-recognition software to come up with the exact breakdown of Mona Lisa's emotional state.

The software was developed with the help of Professor Thomas Huang, a group leader at the Image Formation and Processing Faculty at the Beckman Institute for Advanced Science and Technology of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Sibu specializes in human-computer interaction, or HCI, a technology that allows computers to respond to human beings appropriately by reading the expression on their faces. He used HCI software to create a 3D computer image of Mona Lisa.

This image was compared with images of other women in Sibu's database to quantify the emotion depicted in Leonardo's portrait.

The software looks at features such as the curvature of the lips and crinkles around the eyes to score six basic emotions. It scored Mona Lisa for happiness, disgust, fear, and anger, but found no evidence of surprise or sadness.

Other applications of emotion-recognition software might be to detect terror suspects on the basis of their emotions as well as their physical characteristics.

Professor Huang specializes in computerized image handling. He also is working on image-recognition software that will allow databases of images to be searched on the basis of their visual content rather than the textual title given to them.

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